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COMMENTARY

Gun-Barrel Democracy Has Failed Time and Again

Study suggests U.S. may make Iraq an ally but produce little freedom there.

By George W. Downs and Bruce Bueno de Mesquita

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When it involves itself in the affairs of others, the United States likes to say that it is doing so in defense of freedom and democracy. That's what we said in Iraq, among other things, when we toppled Saddam Hussein. That was part (though not all) of our argument for going after the Taliban in Afghanistan. But it's also what we said in Vietnam in the 1960s, in Grenada in 1983, in Panama in 1989 and in numerous other interventions during the 20th century.

In fact, presidents rarely fail to trot out "democracy" as a justification for their actions abroad. That's because it is popular with Americans, who like to feel they are on the side of the angels. But if it's democracy we're after, we are failing miserably.

Between World War II and the present, the United States intervened more than 35 times in developing countries around the world. But our research shows that in only one case — Colombia after the American decision in 1989 to engage in the war on drugs — did a full-fledged, stable democracy with limits on executive power, clear rules for the transition of power, universal adult suffrage and competitive elections emerge within 10 years. That's a success rate of less than 3%.

After other interventions — such as Guatemala (1954), Nicaragua (1978 and 1982) and Thailand (1966) — various trappings of democracy, such as noncompetitive elections and a limited franchise, were added in the decade that followed but the critical elements of a fully developed democracy simply never emerged.

The results of our engagements in Lebanon (1958), the Republic of the Congo (1967) and, again, Guatemala (1966, 1972) were more dismal still. In these cases intervention actually was followed by deterioration in the modest progress these states had achieved. For instance, the Guatemalan executive was substantially less constrained by law or by the legislature in 1982 than in 1972.

We reached these conclusions by correlating known interventions — including not just large-scale wars but also small actions like flyovers or "advisory" missions — with what is known as the Polity IV Index, an academically accepted measure of the status of democracy and autocracy country by country and year by year.

Though cause and effect cannot always be determined, what is clear is that, time after time, American engagement abroad has not led to more freedom or more democracy in the countries where we've become involved.

Why does the United States show such unimpressive results? Whatever the problem is, it isn't exclusive to the U.S.; the record of other interveners — both democratic and nondemocratic — is no better. Neither Britain, France, Canada nor any other country has an enviable record of creating democracy by military intervention.

Nor can the problems be blamed on the countries in which we chose to intervene. Although it is true that many of these interventions took place in poor countries where the education level was low and where there was little previous experience with democratic institutions, there is scant evidence to suggest that this is why democracy failed to take hold. In fact, neighboring countries generally experienced more progress toward democracy in the ensuing decade than did the states where the intervention occurred. Moreover, even under the best conditions, the chances of success for externally imposed democracy were quite small.

We think a better explanation lies in the inherent tension between America's stated desire to implement democratic processes in the intervened-in nations and its desire to ensure that these nations will pursue policies that reflect U.S. interests.

Conflict between these two goals is almost inevitable, except in the case of primarily humanitarian interventions, which are quite rare and often fail because of a lack of commitment on the part of the interveners (as in the case of Somalia in 1993).

In the typical cases, the United States — like other interveners — has been motivated less by a desire to establish democracy or reduce human suffering than to alter some aspect of the target state's policy. (For instance, the recent invasion of Afghanistan was aimed at ending that country's support for Osama bin Laden more than at bringing democracy to its people.) Although democracy would no doubt be a nice byproduct, it is rarely the most important goal.

In many cases, such as Iraq, American administrations have strong incentives to leave as little as possible to chance. This is because the "Iraq holds the key to winning the war on terror" rhetoric that mobilizes public support for the war leads the same public to expect the Iraqi government that emerges to be an ally in that battle. The creation of a state that is critical of U.S. policy, much less one that is openly sympathetic to enemies of U.S. interests, is simply not an acceptable result.

Unfortunately, the goal of leaving as little as possible to chance is incompatible with the goal of promoting democracy. There's no guarantee that free, fair, open elections in countries like Iraq and Afghanistan will produce governments that back fundamental American policies like opposition to terrorism, a commitment to the free flow of oil to the West and support for the Middle East peace process.

The far more reliable path to a favorable policy outcome is to (a) prop up leaders — usually autocrats — who have a demonstrated track record of sympathy with U.S. goals; (b) appoint a U.S.-interest-dominated "acting government" and then charge it with holding free and fair elections when conditions permit; and (c) design an electoral process that is virtually certain to elect a sympathetic government and promote the dominance of single-party rule or weak central authority for the foreseeable future (the often-forgotten outcome in some of the best cases, like Japan and Germany).

Experience has taught us that these strategies rarely, if ever, lead to anything that looks and functions like a genuine democracy in the short or medium term. But they do give the administration of the intervening country the kind of ally it needs to help achieve its foreign policy goals abroad and its electoral goals at home.

Happy to be free of the burdens of war, voters back home are generally willing to embrace their administration's assurances that however imperfect the new government might appear to "nitpickers," it is now well on the road to democracy. In the case of Iraq, the only ones who will notice that the "model democracy" is really more of an autocracy — or a loose confederation of three separate autocratic states — on the road to nowhere will be its citizens and those of the other Middle Eastern countries.

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